

**CULTURE:**  
**HELP OR HINDRANCE**

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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## **ABSTRACT**

Cultural and economic changes have become a norm in the every day struggle to manage the fire service. The Colorado Springs Fire Department, like most departments throughout the country, is facing the cultural challenges that arise as changes occur. Realizing that an understanding of the fire department culture was necessary to make needed changes in the fire department, Colorado Springs was faced with a dilemma. What is the culture of the Colorado Springs Fire Department? The answer lied in the area of the country the fire department was located in, the history of the department, management style and feelings of the personnel. The purpose of this paper was to research and identify a historical perspective on the culture in the Colorado Springs Fire Department, examine the current cultural trends and project needed changes to assure progress could meld with the accepted culture, to enhance the strength and stability of the Colorado Springs Fire Department.

The research method used was a descriptive study consisting of literature review, a survey instrument, interviews and personal experience. Conclusions were based on a historical review, and a current staff analysis.

The research was employed to measure whether the culture

in the Colorado Springs Fire Department was in line with the fire service in general, and in particular, what was the nature of the local culture. The following specific questions needed to be answered.

1. What is our culture?
2. How do we reinforce our value system?
3. What do we do to form the culture?
4. What traditions do we embrace?
5. Does our culture help or hinder us?
6. Is change needed in our culture?

A literature review was conducted looking for a common definition of culture in the fire service. It also addressed values and tradition, how we form our culture and whether our culture helps or hinders our organization. Cultural data from historical records and current personnel interviews were analyzed, along with the development of a cultural survey instrument.

The results described the employees perception of the fire departments purpose, their values and pride and their feeling on not being appreciated or valued by upper management. The results also showed what the employees felt their culture entailed, how it was formed and what changes were needed.

Recommendations included continuity in management from the Chief through the Battalion/District Chief expressing vision and better communication, holding individuals responsible for rumors and gossip, reinforcing the value of the firefighters, removing confusion in the disciplinary process and modeling behaviors they are looking for in their employees. Accomplishing change through less resistance versus more pressure was also researched.

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## INTRODUCTION

I was standing on the apparatus floor of Fire Station #6 in Colorado Springs, Colorado, admiring the modern day pumper sitting in the south bay. It was a 1997 Becker, with an air conditioned enclosed cab and jump seats, automatic transmission, sliding compartment doors, automatic chains, onboard generator and lights, and a 450 horsepower cummins diesel engine. Twenty five years ago I distinctly remember running on alarms out of this station. The alarm would go off, my partner and I would climb onto the tailboard, grab the bar above the hose load and attempt to put on our bunker gear as we raced out the door. The truck then was a mid 50's American LaFrance, standard transmission, with an open cab. The concept for the open cab was the officer could stand and get a better view of the scene when they arrived. It cost three hundred dollars more to have the cabs removed, and unfortunately, most of the extra view was of the Colorado winter. Reading history books regarding the Colorado Springs Fire Department, I discovered that in 1897, a test of hitching the horses was conducted at Fire Station #1 and it took just 2 1/5 seconds (Williams, 1992). Since the origin of the Colorado Springs Fire department on February 12, 1894, it's quite obvious we have gone through some tremendous growing

pains and have developed and carried on numerous traditions. Throughout this entire time, a culture has been developed and evolved into what we are today.

The fire service is dealing with expanded services, maintained budgets, computerization, a modern day work group, and diversity in the workplace. The struggle to sustain the morale of the workforce, accomplish needed objectives, and embrace the 21<sup>st</sup> century has touched home with everyone. The Colorado Springs Fire Department, like most departments, is challenged with major cultural and economic changes. Some changes come naturally over time and don't appear to cause a great deal of unrest, while others are necessary for survival and don't have the luxury of time on their side. Those changes which involve the cultural stability of an organization seem to cause the most unrest among the employees. Prior to even attempting a cultural change, one must first understand what the culture of their organization is. The problem this raised for top management was, what is the culture of the Colorado Springs Fire Department?

The purpose of this research project was to examine current cultural practices and study present and past cultural trends to determine if the Colorado Springs Fire Department was taking the appropriate course of action regarding

necessary changes and appropriate treatment of their personnel.

Descriptive research methodologies were used to gather information relevant to how we reinforce our values, our reward and punishment system, the traditions we embrace, and how our culture is formed. Fire administration books, journals, magazines, fire service publications, executive development research and motivational studies were utilized to compile information regarding this complex issue. Material dating back ten years was regarded as relevant information accompanied by a current perspective accomplished by a survey of 60 Colorado Springs Firefighters completed in December of 1997. The specific research questions addressed were:

- 0 What is our culture?
- 0 How do we reinforce our value system?
- 0 What do we do to form the culture?
- 0 What traditions do we embrace?
- 0 Does our culture help or hinder us?
- 0 Is change needed in our culture?



## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The Fire Service has been credited as an organization that is tradition bound, resistant to change, and content to remain a fire suppression oriented service. The American Fire Service has been described as "a hundred years of tradition, unhampered by progress." This is obviously overstated, but there is some truth to it. The fire service has a natural tendency to resist change. Changes come very slow, and unfortunately often only after tragic incidents. A good example, is the resistance to change the color of fire trucks. It is a proven fact that lime yellow is more visible than red, but traditionalists will argue that there are alternatives available, that make red fire trucks as safe as lime yellow trucks (Dowling,1992).

Ironically, those of us who have been in the fire service for any number of years, would have to admit that we are in an age of change. The Colorado Springs Fire Department, like many departments across the country is dealing with traditional issues daily. Traditional changes are difficult to deal with in any organization, but some are definitely in need of being looked at. A few of the traditions no longer seen in Colorado Springs would include cutting the cabs off the fire trucks, not wearing breathing

apparatus, riding on the tailboards, playing cards to see who does the noon dishes, moving the newest person any time a firefighter was needed at a different station, and the title of "donkey", when referring to the firefighter in the station with the least seniority.

Tradition can be positive or negative depending on its application. Fortunately The Colorado Springs Fire Department has held on to some of its tradition regarding professionalism and customer service. If you walk into a fire station in Colorado Springs, all firefighters will stand when you enter the room. The firefighters also stand when a Battalion Chief or other ranking officer arrives. This is an area of pride for the firefighters and they are unwilling to give this tradition up. Besides good manners and being courteous, these firefighters believe in themselves (Navarro, 1997). This is so traditional in the fire service. They truly believe if you call, they will come and fix your problem (Carter, 1997). Other lasting traditions in Colorado Springs are the concepts of being people oriented, taking care of our own, and taking pride in what we do. They are an extremely proud group of people. A good example of this was when a comrade came down with a heart problem and needed surgery, the firefighters donated over 600 hours of vacation time so his family would

not have to worry about running out of sick time or lost wages. In spite of all the efforts to make change, it still comes grudgingly, and the best way is when it comes from the troops (Carter, 1997).

The culture in the Colorado Springs Fire Department is similar in many respects to most departments. It's an organization that has drawn the type of individual that wants to help their fellow citizens. They feel good when they're helping others and enjoy a pat on the back when they're finished. The culture in Colorado Springs could be described as a family oriented, close knit group, with high expectations for each other. It has been expressed, that this fire department takes extreme pride in what they do, and take care of their own. One officer described the culture as the Old West Culture. We're independent, but refuse to do the wrong thing (Larsen, 1997). He went on to explain, it's an era in time that brings forth a work ethic uncommon to most. It's like savoring World War 11. There wasn't anything people in this country wouldn't do for the war effort. He related that to how firefighters in Colorado Springs feel about their part as a firefighter in this department.

Along with the cultural values that make a department strong and proud, come some cultural acceptances that bring a

negative note to the department. One of these is the rumor mill. An old saying in this department is, if you haven't heard a rumor by 8 o'clock, start one. Although this is said in jest, it still presents an attitude among the firefighters that is most definitely not a positive attribute. This is not a cultural norm but has evolved over the last several years. Culture embraces a man's integrity, and normally it's all the positive aspects of a person's character. So, the rumor mill antics actually fly in the face of the personality character firefighters normally portray.

Changes are taking place in the fire service daily. Many of these are needed purely for survival into the 21st century. As time goes on and things change, the culture of the organization will make a natural progression, but unfortunately, it's not always at the same rate the rest of the department is developing. Any time change is needed, one must look at the cultural values of the department, to determine the most appropriate course of action. When a shift in strategy is needed, leaders may have to change cultural values to fit and reinforce the new strategy. When management attempts to shift the goals of the organization, to adopt new work methods or to create any fundamental change, the culture may not only fail to support these changes, but may actually

defeat them (Sherburne, 1993). Colorado Springs is facing many of these changes, as well as departments across the country.

Part of the reason for cultural change is the personnel you bring into the department and the city. In 1995, Colorado Springs hired a new Fire Chief from Oakland California. When he arrived, he brought a culture that he had spent 25 plus years nurturing. The City Manager arrived in 1996 from the East Coast, and he also brought a culture unfamiliar to the fire department. The Deputy City Manager is also from California, and his background is in police work, so we were looking at another cultural background somewhat different than ours. Changes in hiring practices also brought a new group of people into Colorado Springs. In the past, a large portion of the hiring pool were local candidates or candidates from around the state. The vacancies now draw candidates from all over the country and especially graduates from other fire academies. In particular, we are drawing a large number of candidates from California, and they do quite well in our promotional process. Along with this, come some of the problems regarding culture we discussed earlier. New personnel coming into this department with their own culture, now melding into the Colorado Springs culture, created some

internal problems that are still being dealt with. The "old guys" feel like the "new guys" have no idea what it was like. There was a general feeling that the new personnel, and the Chief in particular, was trying to reinforce his culture, and bury theirs. We need to defend our culture from assaults by new personnel on the block, who want to come in and modify the very things we love and have worked so hard to accomplish (Watkins, 1997). If the change is an actual improvement, there normally isn't a problem with it, but change for change sake alone causes disruption and anxiety within the organization. If those making the changes are dedicated to doing what is right, the culture will change accordingly.

Cultural diversity is another issue that has come home to the fire service. The fire service in the past, as we have known it, appeared to be an organization created by men for men. The modern fire department, although still predominantly white male, has made great strides in recruiting and hiring personnel from all walks of life. Colorado Springs is dealing with this issue on a daily basis, like all departments. There still is a perception among some firefighters, that certain groups of people, women in particular, shouldn't be firefighters. This is a part of the culture in the fire

service that has changed and will take some time before it is completely resolved.

This project evolved from the Executive Leadership Course concepts of problem identification, problem solving, research methodology and research reporting. The subjects of assessing the organizational culture, the elements of an organizational culture, and how culture is imbedded in an organization, were related to chapter 7 in the Executive Leadership course, taught by Larry Ritcey, Oliver Jones, and Charles J. Burkell. The research is geared primarily toward the problem solving module of the course curriculum. Its intent is to contribute to the fire service body of knowledge at the National Fire Academy and address a problem felt by all fire departments large and small.

Solutions to this problem will have long-term effects on Colorado Springs and other fire departments throughout the nation. A stronger, more harmonious workforce, a better understanding of how our cultures are formed and reinforced, and the realization that the culture of each department must be understood before successful changes can be made, are just a few of the enhancements that will be gained, as progress is made in this area of the fire service.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Culture in the fire service is a subject that has caused many a Chief to ponder extensively. The ethnology or written description of a culture, has as many definitions as there are articles on change management, and none of them give us much help in telling us how or even what to fix (Pascale, 1997). Culture to the organization is what personality is to the individual. The culture of an organization is made up of its values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, and norms, which provide meaning, direction, and mobilization to the organization (Moran, 1996). Culture has also been described in the Colorado Springs Fire Department as the embracement of a man's character (Larsen, 1997). Culture is patterns of behavior, knowledge, thoughts, and feelings that are socially transmitted (Fish/White, 1996). Culture characterizes a group rather than individuals. The fire department makes up a culture that is separate from the culture of the City of Colorado Springs because the firefighters are socialized to share the same basic behaviors and knowledge. The culture that is shared by the fire department allows them to form a cohesive unit and to efficiently execute their duties. Even though the firefighters all share a basic culture, smaller subcultures emerge within the department. However, our



results reveal that these subcultures allow the formation of an even more cohesive unit, rather than serving to disrupt the overall culture (Fish/White, 1996).

Culture was identified as a major barrier to transition in all organizations, but it was apparent that the fire service struggles even more than others with transition because of the added burden of tradition (Sherbburne, 1993). Clinging to outmoded traditional ways of approaching challenges, can hurt us and the citizens we serve. Tradition can retard our progress (Piringer, 1990). Tradition can cut both ways. Traditions can be positive. Our traditions have led us to expand the range of services we provide to our communities. Our traditions have made us better. The fire service has a tradition of asking why? and why not? and are there other ways? We are still America's heroes. Why? Because we have always maintained a tradition that we could do better, insisted that we could do better. We've always been willing to reinvent ourselves for the common good (Piringer, 1990). Like many concepts, tradition has taken a bum rap over the last few years. Often we tend to overlook the strength that worthwhile traditions have to offer. One of the traditions I'm referring to, is the tradition of loyalty. The true leader is one who is fair, firm, and able. This person

had each of these traits in spades. In his case, he lived, ate, and slept the traditional concept of loyalty. It was, is, and will remain, a good tradition (Carter, 1987). The positive aspects of tradition too often have been sacrificed upon the altar of progress. It is my contention, that fire departments cannot succeed as organizations if they fail to adhere to the positive traditions instilled in the fire service (Carter, 1987).

Our values go hand in hand with culture and tradition. The most effective way to reinforce our value system is by example. You can talk until you're blue in the face, but the real effectiveness lies in being trustworthy, honest, and maintaining a level of integrity (Watkins, 1997). You can't say one thing and do another. If you want to reinforce a value, you must model it. You need to be a mirror image of a class act (Navarro, 1997). Another way to reinforce, is to coach those who emulate your values. Values are passed on from one generation to the next, both by formal and informal leaders. Values in most departments are presently in a state of flux, because new personnel continue to bring in new values, and chip away at the old value system (Carter, 1997). When reinforcing values, your intent is to create a climate that encourages people to do the right thing in every

instance, but to use judgment about whether to do the same thing each time (Sherburne, 1993). There are those that feel our value system isn't as strong as it once was. Officers need to be educated in regards to the purpose of their job. They need to learn to assist with change. The Officers are unwilling to chastise their friends (Manuszak, 1997).

These guys believe in themselves. You can call it ego, or pride, or whatever you want to, but they do the work and get the job done, and sometimes it's midnight when they have to do it. The type of problem doesn't appear to matter, their goal is the same, accomplish the objective (Navarro, 1997). The culture in The Colorado Springs Fire department is a people sensitive culture. Those that are here enjoy helping others. Those that don't, normally aren't successful in this field. The fire service culture still promotes seeking out better ways of doing things. Firefighters don't want to make mistakes. Firefighters don't want to get hurt or killed. Firefighters don't want to use outdated techniques. Firefighters don't want to use second-class equipment. Firefighters, as rational adults, want to do the right thing. Fire and rescue services want to go in and help make things better. All of these cultural strongholds are looked at in a positive vein. That's not to say all our cultures help our

cause. There are parts of our culture that fly in the face of safety, progress, and good common sense. Fire service organizations are traditional beings, and in general, resist transition. Culture has been identified as a major barrier to transition (Sherburne, 1993). The fire service has not been progressive in changing their image. The traditional belief "the public needs us" is extremely detrimental to success. An example of culture and tradition carrying some serious weight is in the area of red fire trucks. Many chiefs opting for a popular cause support red. Some who have switched to red or red and white have said privately they do it because it is popular and does not have anything to do with visibility or safety, but rather with personal emotions (Solomon, 1988).

The next question is always on everybody's mind. Is change needed in our culture? Most feel that change for change sake is not only not necessary, but detrimental. If people are conscientious and dedicated, and trying to do the right thing, the culture will change accordingly (Carter, 1995). One of the biggest changes needed, is to educate and inform the public about the services we have to offer (Manuszak, 1997). The public's perception of what the fire department does, is no where near the reality of the fire departments actual function and responsibility. This needs to

be corrected so the citizens are aware of how we operate as an organization. We still have people asking us how much we charge for responding to their fires. This is definitely unacceptable. We need to expand our services into those areas needing our assistance and examine those responses we do because there is no one else to do it. These are the type of things that fall under customer service.

Most departments have gone to driving academy's and stricter adherence to safety while responding to alarms. However there are still those out there who feel because we have a large emergency vehicle, responding red light and siren, we can run at excessive speeds and bully our way through the streets. In one presentation at the IAFC, it was stated that for each fire fighter killed on the way to a fire, about 10 civilians would be killed or seriously injured by responding apparatus. It is conceivable that we will kill or injure more people on the way to a call than what we heroically rescue after we arrive (Solomon, 1988).

An example of culture or tradition getting in the way of safety is in the area of protective gear. Nomex hoods cover the entire head under the helmet and seal gaps of exposed skin around the face pieces, between collars and helmet flaps. This relatively new product should be the first piece of

personal protection gear donned. Traditionalists say they can't feel the increase of heat upon their ears to tell them its too hot in a burning building (Pagels, 1987). Safety is a part of our job that must be adhered to, and culture should not be an issue. Another example of this is, seven percent of lung or smoke inhalation injuries are suffered by Chiefs who seldom have SCBA on during outside or inside operations.

Studies support change as the agent for survival of both non-fire service and fire service organizations. The literature highlights the dire consequences of attempting to remain with status quo and ignoring legal liability, safety, cultural, ethical, diversity, and economic issues. Lacking essential change, every organization is doomed and will be brought down by internal disorganization and inertia unless external forces shore it up and keep it running (Sherburne, 1993).

The writings of Pascale and Moran influenced this research by supporting the rationale that the culture of an organization is similar to the personality of an individual. There writings also supported an outside study of the culture of the Colorado Springs Fire Department by Ethan White and Krista Fish. Sherburne and Pirenger led the research into the area of tradition and swayed me to look at both the positive

and negative aspects of the subject. The expertise of Navarro, Carter, Watkins, Larsen, and Manuszak, influenced this paper by lending support to the study from a historical perspective regarding Colorado Springs. Chief Navarro brought an outside perspective into the culture of the Colorado Springs Fire Department, while Larsen, Watkins, Carter, and Manuszak brought a perspective relevant to their insight from years of experience. Their collective years of experience and knowledge base regarding the fire department had a definite influence on the direction of the remaining research. The writings of Soloman again led me to believe change was a necessary evil for survival, therefore that was another element I researched in doing my final analysis.

## **PROCEDURES**

The specific research topic was selected from a variety of fire service related problems, to address the ongoing concern of cultural effects on personnel and their awareness of their culture. The procedures used a historical review, evaluative research, a self administered survey, interviews with Colorado Springs Fire Officers who have long standing internal viewpoints, and the Fire Chief of Colorado Springs,

who spent several years in Oakland California and brought a West Coast perspective.

The National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg Maryland, was the source of the research conducted for the literature review portion of the research. Additional literature review was conducted between July and October of 1997, at the Penrose Public Library in Colorado Springs, the Colorado Springs Fire Department Training Library, and the author's personal library. The literature review focused on finding a common definition of culture in the fire service. It also addressed the reinforcement of values and tradition, how we form our culture, and whether our culture helps or hinders our progress as an organization. What traditions are we willing to fight for and is our culture in need of change were also topics of concern. Documentation was compiled from fire journals, public management volumes, fire training publications, and articles from fire experts. The information was used to determine a commonality among fire departments with regard to culture and particularly the culture in Colorado Springs.

Limiting factors of the survey were the small population surveyed, open ended questions which left a wide disparity in answers, and the fact that even though there is similarity in



culture throughout the fire service, each department is a subculture of that general culture, and struggles daily with their own identity. Research was also limited to some extent by the lack of documented information available. The survey instrument and the interviews also gave a local slant to the information collated.

Personal interviews were conducted with Manuel Navarro, the Chief of the Colorado Springs Fire Department, Frank A. Carter 11, a Deputy Chief with the Colorado Springs Fire Department, James A. Larsen and David L. Watkins who are Battalion Chiefs with the Colorado Springs Fire Department, and Roy D. Manuszak, who is a Captain with the Colorado Springs Fire Department. The reasoning behind the interview process was to gain an in depth perception of the local culture by officers who had both been in the fire service for several years and those who came from other departments and cultures. The experience and insight of these officers gave credibility to the results of the survey.

The survey population was defined as uniformed personnel within the Colorado Springs Fire Department. Five Battalion Chiefs, 11 Captains, 13 Lieutenants, 9 Paramedics, 10 Driver Engineers, and 12 Firefighters were used because they represent the rank and file that accepts, forms, and passes on

the cultural norm in Colorado Springs. Surveys were distributed to 60 employees with a return of 29, representing a 48.3 percent response rate. While this target group may not represent the fire service in general, it is extremely effective when dealing with Colorado Springs as the target fire department. Cultural identity is and has become a common problem in the fire service. Solutions derived as a result of this project (even on a local basis) will add to the data base already compiled and provide information to those departments looking for positive solutions.

Because of the local nature of the project, the survey instrument ( Appendix A) was developed, placing emphasis on the current opinions of the target audience. The officers perceptions of the local fire department culture, carry equal weight as the compilation of data. The survey was test piloted at Fire Station 6 and was distributed to 1 Lieutenant, 1 Driver Engineer, 1 Paramedic, and 1 Firefighter for ease of comprehension and credibility. The pilot instrument was reviewed and a final document was developed and administered to 60 Colorado Springs Fire Department Officers. The results were collated, analyzed and recorded. A feeling for the departments cultural background was beginning to form.

Results were summarized, analyzed, documented and transformed into theories and recommendations for understanding an ever changing culture in Colorado Springs.

## **RESULTS**

Survey instruments were administered to 60 officers on the Colorado Springs Fire Department. Twenty-nine instruments were returned, equating to a 48.3 percent survey return rate. I was unable to rationalize why there was a difference in survey instrument returns by rank, but the data indicated the return rate was 60 percent for Battalion Chiefs and 25 percent for firefighters. A confidence level of 95 percent was not achieved via the low return rate. This confidence level was verified using the table in unit three in the executive Development Student Manual ( pp 13-39).

Extensive research revealed that no hard data regarding the fire service culture or the culture of individual departments, was available. However, outside agencies can offer input regarding philosophy, attitudes, and an outlook on their individual fire department culture. Research was done within the history of the Colorado Springs Fire Department, regarding the culture and tradition dating back to the Fire

Department's inception in 1894. Forty five percent of the fire service officers surveyed felt the purpose of the fire department was to provide ems, special rescue, hazardous materials response, fire prevention and education to the citizens of Colorado Springs in a cost effective manner. Forty one percent of the respondents felt saving lives and protecting property better defined their purpose. While 41 percent of the surveys indicated value was strongly placed on teamwork, intervening any situation and bringing it to conclusion, 41 percent also said their values were honesty, integrity, customer service, loyalty and the welfare of the citizens. Of all the sayings, mottos, and phrases that float around the fire department, "fight fire, save lives, and protect property" was still favored by the respondents by 28 percent. Thirty eight percent of the respondents felt being a firefighter is still the best job in the world, and took pride in belonging to the organization. However, 24 percent felt in the Colorado Springs Fire Department, administration didn't support the line; 17 percent felt that administration and the line were on different sides of the fence on most issues, and there was a lack of accountability and trust for city administration and upper management in the fire department; 13 percent felt the Chief didn't realize the quality of

individuals he had working for him and that he didn't care about his employees or respect them, and 13 percent felt they were giving up firefighter benefits to provide additional services to the city. When asked if there were any elements of the organizational culture that didn't

support the mission, the answers varied considerably, but 21 percent of them stated that personal agendas replacing organizational goals stood out as being the most flagrant.

The research was employed to determine the cultural background of the Colorado Springs Fire Department so a basis could be developed for a better understanding of the personnel and gain a better insight into future decisions. The answers to the specific research questions considered were:

1. What is our culture? The fire department culture is a classic battle between the survival of deep rooted traditions (common to the fire service) and the evolution of changes and progress. The culture in Colorado Springs consists of a blend of pride, integrity, compassion and respect, rooted in tradition and embroiled in change. The respondents identified family and team as the number one strength when referring to their culture. They also addressed the department being steeped in tradition, but

changing with time. They felt their culture was diverse, where the old teach the new, and constantly in turmoil. There was a fear of consequences for non compliance and they were unsure of today and fearful of tomorrow. When people in Colorado Springs talk about the fire department culture, they talk about being motivated by giving service to the people. The employees feel their culture relates to doing for or helping someone else. It boils down to people taking care of people. Culture can be separated in the fire service to operative culture and personal culture. Operative refers to how we do the job and adapt to change, and personal is what we actually think. The culture in Colorado Springs leans more toward the progressive side than the traditional. They have embraced leading edge concepts in the fire service as they arrived, to include EMT's, Paramedics, public education, customer service, urban interface pumpers, hazardous materials, and high angle rescue. The traditional side of their culture is their feelings about their work and themselves, and their commitment to each other. Another part of their culture causes some concern because they are a social group. They have a tendency to be the "nice guys". They want to keep everybody happy

and not hurt anyone's feelings. This can be detrimental regarding evaluations. Their evaluations address only the positive side of things, creating a halo effect. If employees are handled with kid gloves, they may not realize their actual strengths and weaknesses. The culture in Colorado Springs can finally be described as a family oriented organization. They are close knit with high expectations of each other. The general feeling is it's not as tight a group as it was.

2. How do we reinforce our value system? We reinforce our culture and value system through rewards. Rewards can be assigned through validation, pride, promotion, time off, or the knowledge of a job done well. Sometime we offer rewards to a yes man. The down side of this is he/she loses the respect of their peers, and this is more of a loss than any reward. Formal recognition is another form of reward. Colorado Springs has formed an awards and recognition committee to look into situations and verify and acknowledge those deserving of recognition. In the past a value was keeping your job for your family. In today's society, family has taken a much more important role. Values are reinforced by peers. Acceptance is a

needed value, people need to feel wanted and needed. Firefighters still have subtle ways of making this happen. Non followers are sometimes verbally put down, and authority is sometimes abused by officers. Our culture and values are also reinforced by modeling. Individuals with leadership characters are picked to model the behavior, and they are coached to do well. Therefore, you coach those who emulate your values. People tend to support the best guys. These are the men and women who perform with integrity, honesty, and forthrightness with respect.

3. What do we do to form the culture? The culture of the organization has been forged through many years of tradition, evolutionary changes (safety concepts, apparatus and equipment improvements), and varied administrative ideals. Culture is learned behavior and ideas that human beings acquire as members of a society. Colorado Springs has a highly effective method of enculturation through their training period and firefighter 4th class period (recruit). The training period requires the new recruit to go through 3 weeks of EMT training and 7 weeks of fire fighting training. The enculturation process continues throughout a



firefighter's career. As personnel promote, they continue their training, where they learn how to respond in a variety of positions, such as driver or paramedic. In addition to the official enculturation period that all firefighters go through, some firefighters also go through an informal enculturation process. Many of the firefighters are second or third generation firefighters. Growing up around firefighters enculturates some firefighters long before they participate in official training. Another mechanism which acts to maintain the culture is the total immersion that the firefighter experiences on the job. The firefighter lives and works around other firefighters for 24 hour periods. This constant exposure to members of the same culture reinforces cultural traits and cultural ideas. Another, and perhaps the most influential mechanism for reinforcing the culture, is the firefighters actions when responding to an alarm. While waiting for the alarm to sound, roles in the fire department are relatively undefined. However, when the alarm sounds, a sudden transformation occurs. Immediately, the firefighters assume their roles and the duties which accompany their roles. The importance of performing one's duty is so

engrained in the firefighters that they put aside any thoughts of what they were doing previous to the alarm. This in turn reinforces the overall culture of the Colorado Springs Fire Department (Fish/White, 1996).

4. What traditions do we embrace? The Colorado Springs Fire Department is still a strong and proud organization. The one thing that separates the Colorado Springs fire Department from other business is that even when benefits or wages are substandard, or morale is damaged, the service to the public never suffers. Manners, respect, and being polite is not only the right thing to do, but it has been a tradition in the Colorado Springs Fire Department since it's inception. Their goal is to leave a positive, lasting impression on every individual they come into contact with, whether it's to save their life or take their blood pressure. They emphasize customer service and professionalism. They live and believe "If you call, we'll come and fix your problem". The fire department takes pride in being a para-military organization, maintaining their equipment in excellent condition, and being held high in the public opinion. Traditionally, warriors assumed symbols, uniforms, colors, and oaths. The fire service has many similar

patterns. They are very traditional when it comes to history, successes, values, and momentos. The fire service should never lose sight of the fact that they have more history than any organization. They cling to their values and sense of purpose (Navarro, 1997).

5. Does our culture help or hinder us? It appears at times, some of the older and more traditional elements of the fire department's culture, hinder or slow the overall efforts of those within the organization to achieve some of the organizations identified goals. The fire culture, which is built around service and people, makes everyone proud to be tied to the fire service. Unfortunately, this tends to make some people hard to deal with and causes them to be somewhat resistant to change. Everyone develops a stereotype of what the job should be, and if new ideas don't fit, the personnel don't want to change. Some ideas don't meet their expectations. We tend to perpetuate the culture we grew up with and are comfortable with. Although our culture clings to some of the old traditions and ideas, for the most part Colorado Springs is a progressive department. This department is a very people sensitive culture and the firefighters like helping people. Those who don't accept this culture

usually aren't successful in the fire department. The fire department is loved and therefore this gives them a tremendous opportunity in the community. The part of their culture that drives them to be the best at what they do and being innovative in areas never touched before, helps them to grab new technology as it enters the field and perform their duties at a level exceeded by few. Our culture makes them the professional organization that every firefighter is proud of.

6. Is change needed in our culture? Like all organizations the fire service must change to meet the demands of its customers. Without change, we will not survive as a fire service. I refer back to the days when we didn't have breathing apparatus for all the firefighters on a vehicle. This is totally unacceptable by today's standards. Safety is one area where great strides have been made in the employee's favor. The customer's needs are constantly changing so the fire department must change to meet their needs. Colorado Springs has worked hard to meet all the needs and challenges that have come along through the years. I have seen the inception of emt's, paramedics, high angle rescue teams, heavy rescue teams, underwater experts, hazardous materials

responders, urban interface 4 wheel drive pumpers and wildland trained firefighters. This is commendable but one can never quit keeping up with progress, if they are to survive. On a more local note, Colorado Springs has several things to consider changing in it's present culture. This fire department has been reorganizing for several years, and it's time to put some stability back into the organization. The lack of continuity in management has been an issue for years. It's time for some stability in the management ranks. Another issue needing attention is the fact that some personnel have placed personal agendas ahead of the department goals. Past issues and attitudes regarding females in the workplace, sex, ethnic background jokes, hazing, and other issues which may have been acceptable in the past can no longer be tolerated. The Colorado Springs Fire Department needs to become more professional in some areas. They need to treat others as they want to be treated, eliminate the spreading of rumors and gossip about others, and model exemplary behavior. Presently an environment of trust needs to be built between management and the line. The fire department needs to allow personnel to feel good about the things they have done

right, support leadership and have them support you, and empower the people. Another necessary change is the perception the public has for the fire department. We need to take a hard look at things we do because there is no one else to do it. An example of this would be responding to help someone back into bed or a wheel chair. Our culture is presently in a state of turmoil. There are too many balls in the air and too many issues out there that aren't being resolved in a timely fashion. Change is a necessary evil for survival, but it needs to be done in a professional and timely manner. Change is not accomplished by more pressure, but by less resistance.

## **DISCUSSION/IMPLEMENTATION**

The literature review revealed that each Fire Department had its own culture and therefore each definition of culture was somewhat different. However, most organizations defined culture in general terms to include their values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions and norms, which provide meaning, direction, and mobilization to the organization (Morn, 1996). The respondents in Colorado Springs fell in line with their

definition by describing their culture as family and team oriented, a blend of pride, integrity, compassion and respect, rooted in tradition. Operative culture was described as how we do the job and personal culture stated what we think about the job and people involved. Culture is a pattern of behavior, knowledge, thoughts and feelings that are socially transmitted (Fish/White, 1996).

Culture was identified as a major barrier to transition in all organizations, but it was apparent that the fire service struggles even more than others with transition, because of the added burden of tradition (Sherburne, 1993). Officers in Colorado Springs felt they needed to defend their culture from assaults by "new kids on the block" or new firefighters who want to come in and modify the things they loved. When reinforcing values, your intent is to create a climate that encourages people to do the right thing in every instance, but to use judgment about whether to do the same thing each time (Sherburne, 1993). Chief Navarro, of the Colorado Springs Fire Department added credibility to Sherburne's statement by saying "in order to reinforce values one must model it. You can't say one thing and do another. You need to be a mirror image of a class act".

Change is a subject in the fire service that puts everyone on edge. Traditionalists cringe when their turf is imposed upon. Although firefighters in Colorado Springs are constantly in the process of change, they do so grudgingly. The fire service tends to change slowly. One respondent remarked that he felt the Colorado Springs culture was under a tremendous amount of stress due to the hiring of a new Chief, bringing with him his "old culture" and demanding change. Regardless of the speed of change, everyone is aware that changes to keep up with customer demand are necessary. The literature highlights the dire consequences of attempting to remain with status quo and ignoring legal liability, safety, cultural, ethical, diversity, and economic issues. Lacking essential change, every organization is doomed and will be brought down by internal disorganization and inertia unless external forces shore it up and keep it running (Sherburne, 1993).

The study results reinforced the concept that we are a family oriented organization in the business of helping people. The respondents reaffirmed the idea that our purpose is to provide fire suppression, EMS, haz mat, fire prevention and education to the citizens. Forty one percent of the respondents feel the number one value is customer service,



honesty, integrity, loyalty and dependability. Firefighters still take pride in the organization and the fact that they are firefighters. This pride shows in some of their mottos such as fight fires, save lives and protect property, we can handle it, or see you at the big one. These guys believe in themselves. One of the interesting things that the study revealed was, firefighters still feel they have the best job in the world. Ironically, it also revealed the insecurity they felt with fire administration. They expressed concern over lack of support from administration and lack of accountability and trust. People have polarized into small groups and frustration has set in. There is a feeling of not being valued throughout the department. They openly admit they want an administration that will lead them, stand up for them, admit their mistakes and act in a manner to be trusted.

There appears to be serious concern over the loss of family and team in the department. Changes are happening and this is a threat to many. Many are unsure of the direction of the department. From a research perspective, the study presented some interesting and at times unexpected results. Originally, I felt that the Colorado Springs fire Department was a very traditional fire department. Indeed, there are areas where the department is traditional, but their work

ethic, their entrepreneurial talents, and their drive for excellence moves them well into the progressive side of the scale. They are extremely traditional regarding honor, pride, integrity, honesty and respect. The progressive side rears its head when they talk about the fire service of the future and their attitude about accepting new ideas and programs. While they are being progressive and encouraging new ideas, the amount of change has taken a toll.

Much of the focus and energy of the fire department is currently distracted from the mission by imposed change. The department continues to provide a high quality service to the community, but some level of patience, tolerance and compassion of the culture is lost in the upheaval of change. There is a loss in pride in the organization as people feel devalued. There is question in the upper management and lack of trust causes unrest in the line firefighter. Firefighters feel programs are being implemented on the backs of the employees and many employees are concerned about the direction of the organization and resulting impacts, such as service reductions. There is a loss of family in the organization and respondents are concerned that the teamwork necessary to function on the line is at stake. Frustration is at a higher level than has been in the past. The results

of the study clearly indicate that the culture and stability of this department is presently in turmoil. The other side of that is, the firefighters take pride in the fact that the one thing that separates the fire department from other business is that even when benefits or wages are substandard, or morale is damaged, the service to the public never suffers.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The analysis of the research from the survey instrument and the collating of information from the writings of others, indicates that the culture in the Colorado Springs Fire Department, although somewhat independent, still has many of the inherent problems facing departments across the country. Because of the various department personnel and the unique personalities of each, no one solution will solve the problem of culture. Each department must examine and select the recommendation that most suit their personnel and department and utilize more than one method.

Lack of continuity in management has been an issue for years, particularly from the Chief through the

Battalion/District Chief level. It has been stated around the kitchen table that there are the "A-B-C" shifts, and they're like three different departments. Solutions to this perception are difficult, especially in larger organizations. Communications is a large part of the lack of continuity in getting information from the Chief to the line. In order for the same information to be transferred from the top down, the management team must all be on the same page. The Chief's executive staff must all have the vision of the department in mind and be working toward the same goals. Teamwork is of the essence at this level, otherwise the mission can be undermined at any level. Not having the vital information to give to the troops also invites misunderstanding and worse yet, rumors. Rumors and gossip can kill an organization. Firefighters have a reputation of passing rumors and gossip and at times it can be extremely detrimental to operations. In these situations personnel need to be held responsible if they're involved in passing information that's erroneous.

The Colorado Springs fire Department is in the process of change daily and there are many outward manifestations of change to include a new Chief, uniforms, 4 wheel drive pumpers, logos and patches. These are all important but they don't touch the hearts of the employees like the general

frustration of not being valued by upper management. Their feelings are that management is too reactive to discipline, special interest groups have greater influence over the decision making processes exercised by our leadership, the Chief is distanced from the uniform staff by civilians, and the decision to extend the firefighters work week makes them feel less important. These issues can be overcome over time, but the process is slow. The Awards and Recognition Committee is working toward catching people doing the right thing and recognizing them for those efforts. This is a step in the right direction. Being trustworthy and honest will begin to build a level of trust back into the organization. People need to feel good knowing they did the right thing. As individuals, they need to support management, and in turn management needs to support its employees. The personnel need to be trusted in order to empower them. If you empower without trust, you are still controlling them. Management needs to model the behaviors they are looking for. The battle between the survival of deep rooted traditions and the evolution of change and progress causes extreme frustration in employees. This has to be understood by management and dealt with accordingly. If it isn't understood, it increases their frustration even more and eventually turns to apathy.

There is confusion in the discipline process in Colorado Springs and the anxiety it has caused creates managers who either make poor decisions, or are afraid to make decisions. Issues that seem insignificant to line personnel are major issues with management. This area of concern is presently being dealt with in Colorado Springs by the redesigning of the discipline process through work sessions, discussion and the implementation of a peer review group. This basically gives the employee involved options to his/her outcome regarding discipline. It moves the final say in an issue from one person to a group of peers listening to the situation and making recommendations. This by no means however, takes away their legal rights. It's now in the final stages of development and appears to be a positive solution to a serious concern.

Change itself causes unrest in personnel, and although we are aware this is happening, often nothing is done to relieve it. Change is accomplished through less resistance, not more pressure. There is a general feeling that administration is highlighting and force feeding "diversity". As a result there is an increase in resistance to the ideas and concepts. There is a feeling administration is purposely trying to dissolve the bond that we share, creating an "us vs them" attitude.

These issues will come into line as administration understands the feelings of the troops. A blend of necessity for change and compassion must be struck. Understanding on both sides, administration and line personnel, will ease the tension caused with change. Make changes that are necessary for improvement and survival of the organization and not just for the sake of changing. If the decisions made by management are dedicated, conscientious, and in the line of trying to do the right thing, the culture will change accordingly.

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## APPENDIX A

## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ASSESSMENT

1. What is your present rank in the fire department?
2. What is the fire department's purpose?
3. What things do we place value on?
4. Are there any sayings, phrases, mottos, etc. that are common to all members of the organization?
5. Are there individual feelings that are common among members of the organization, concerning the organization?
6. If you were to describe our organizational culture in one phrase, what would it be?
7. Are there any elements of the organization's culture that do not support its mission?
8. What rewards/punishments reinforce our present culture?
9. What other comments regarding our fire department culture will enhance this research?

## APPENDIX B

## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ASSESSMENT

1. What is your present rank in the fire department?

Survey Instruments	Returned	
Percent		
5 Battalion Chiefs	3	60
11 Captains	4	
36.4		
13 Lieutenants	8	
61.5		
9 Paramedics	5	
55.6		
10 Driver Engineers	6	60
12 Firefighters	3	25
Total	29	
48.3		

2. What is the fire department's purpose?

Response	Reason
13	Provide fire suppression, ems, special rescue, haz mat, fire prevention and education to the citizens of Colorado Springs in a cost effective manner to provide the acceptable level
12	Save lives and protect property
4	To ensure public safety by actively educating the corporate and public sectors on fire safety issues
1	Prevent conflagration: help in times of emergency and through our efforts provide a sense of security and well being for the community
1	Prompt emergency incident response

1 To provide caring emergency medical assistance  
to  
the sick and injured

1 To be adequately staffed, trained and equipped  
to respond at any time to situations  
the general

public are not able to mitigate and render  
emergency and medical care for the protection  
for

the people and property of our city.

### 3. What things do we place value on?

12 Customer service, honesty integrity, loyalty,  
dependability, and the welfare of the citizens  
of

Colorado Springs. Pride in the organization

12 Successfully intervene in any situation and be  
able to adapt to the changing needs of our  
customers and the job and bring all of these  
situations to conclusion. Teamwork

8 Human life and personal property

7 Fellow firefighters, ourselves and our

families,

finances, safety, and quality of life

5 Public perception of our work

Good decision making, hard work

1 Education

1 Professionalism

4. Are there any sayings, phrases, mottos, etc. that are  
common to all members of the organization?

8 Fight fires, save lives and protect property

5 Nothing common to all

2 Put the wet stuff on the red stuff

1 Telephone, telegraph, tell-a-firefighter

1 Eat till you're sleepy, sleep till your hungry

1 Anyone can eat when they're hungry, it takes a  
man to eat when he's full

1 We need to get on the same page

1 Zero tolerance

1 We can handle it

1 Take care of our own

1 One big family

1 Talking on the radio doesn't put the fire out



1     Firefighting succeeds in inverse proportion to  
the

number of chiefs on scene

1     We have done so much for so long with so little  
that we think we can do anything with nothing

1     See you at the big one

1     There is no I in team

1     Candle moth syndrome

1     All fires eventually go out

5. Are there individual feelings that are common among members  
of the organization, concerning the organization?

11    Best job in the world. Pride in belonging.

Best

department in the country. Identification with

a

professional organization

7     Administration doesn't support the line  
Administration and line on different sides of  
fence

5     Lack of accountability, a lack of trust for

City

Administration, and upper fire department

administration

People have retreated into support groups

4 Chief doesn't realize the quality of individuals  
he has and doesn't care about employees or  
respect them

4 Giving up firefighters benefits for additional  
services

3 One huge family

3 Frustration

2 Fire administration too reactive, can't get  
together

1 Small special interest groups appear to have  
greater influence over the decision making  
processes exercised by our leadership than the  
majority do, especially when employee issues are  
involved

1 The leadership of the department gives too much  
attention to petty issues

1 City Manager has too much influence over our day  
to day operations

1 Dealing with diversity hampered by  
administration

attitude

1 Confusion as to discipline directions and fair  
treatment of same

1 Politics tearing job up

1 Union promoting an "us vs. them atmosphere

1 District Chiefs abuse right to direct work force  
by punitive moves

1 Firefighters have become apathetic

1 Be fair and do what's right

1 We need an administration that will lead us,  
stand

up for us, admit mistakes and one we can trust

1 Good ole boy system

6. If you were to describe our organizational culture in one  
phrase, what would it be?

5 Family and team

4 Changing with time, steeped in tradition

3 Diverse

3 Battle between the survival of deep rooted  
traditions and the evolution of changes and  
progress

- 2 A blend of pride, integrity, compassion, and respect rooted in tradition and embroiled in change
- 2 Fear of consequences of non-compliance. Unsure of today, fearful of tomorrow
- 2 Hypocritical
- 1 The old teach the new
- 1 In turmoil
- 1 Independently thinking and acting individuals tightly interwoven into a team which is highly dedicated toward meeting the goals of the department and in its service to the people of Colorado Springs
- 1 Functional to an insider, dysfunctional to an outsider

7. Are there any elements of the organization's culture that do not support its mission?

- 6 Personal agendas replacing organizational goals
- 4 Lack of support from upper management
- 1 non-emergent situations many times prevents us from making changes and adjustments quickly as conditions change

- 1     Infighting among senior staff
- 1     Lack of accountability and discipline procedures
- 1     Do as I say, not as I do philosophy
- 1     Subculture trying to undermine the chief
- 1     When new recruits hit the line all formal  
respect  
lost
- 1     Lack of trust and support for administration
- 1     Tradition and culture slow progress of  
department
- 1     Lack of trust and respect for senior staff
- 1     Kingdom building by civilian staff
- 1     Fire administration highlighting and force-  
feeding  
"diversity"

8 What rewards/punishments reinforce our present culture?

- 8     Respect of peers major reward
- 7     Inconsistent/inappropriate discipline
- 5     Formal recognition ( awards and recognition  
committee)

5 Rewards or punishment can be assignment choice,  
promotion, validation, pride

4 Time off, loss of pay

2 Rewards of a job well done

1 All pleased when peer gets recognized formally

1 Complaints with/Lawyer get top priority

City rolls over

1 Punishments too numerous to name as evidenced by  
the size and content of our policy and procedure  
manual.

1 Feeling our people are expendable

1 Change of assignment as punishment

1 Rewards of a yes man

9. What other comments regarding our fire department culture  
will enhance this research?

1 Our department is just now starting to  
understand the expectations of a fire chief who  
was not

reared in our department

1 Still a very strong and proud organization

- 1 Tend to change slowly
- 1 The current administration is purposely trying to dissolve the bond that we share, creating an "us against them" atmosphere
- 1 Lack of continuity in management
- 1 personal agendas get in way of mission
- 1 favors and friendships have played out over years
- 1 Family unity and the deep seeded concern for each other is our strong point
- 1 In spite of our internal problems we still rise to the needs of the community and overall perform our duties in an exemplary manner
- 1 Bend over backwards to accommodate protected classes
- 1 The one thing that separates our fire department from other businesses is that even when benefits or wages are substandard or morale is damaged, the

service to the public never suffers

1 Public perception of our work and life style is  
very important

1 We are a culture of copers. We must deal with  
people in need and usually at their worst. We  
see

the worst and most needy in people and must cope

1 We have adapted to the abuse

1 Old culture is under tremendous stress due to  
hiring of new chief bringing with him his "old"  
culture and demanding change

1 Need a common mission and vision

1 Used to be a family, now everyone for themselves



1 Have been in a state of constant reorganization  
since 1982

1 Much of the focus and energy of the fire  
department is currently distracted from our  
mission by imposed changes.